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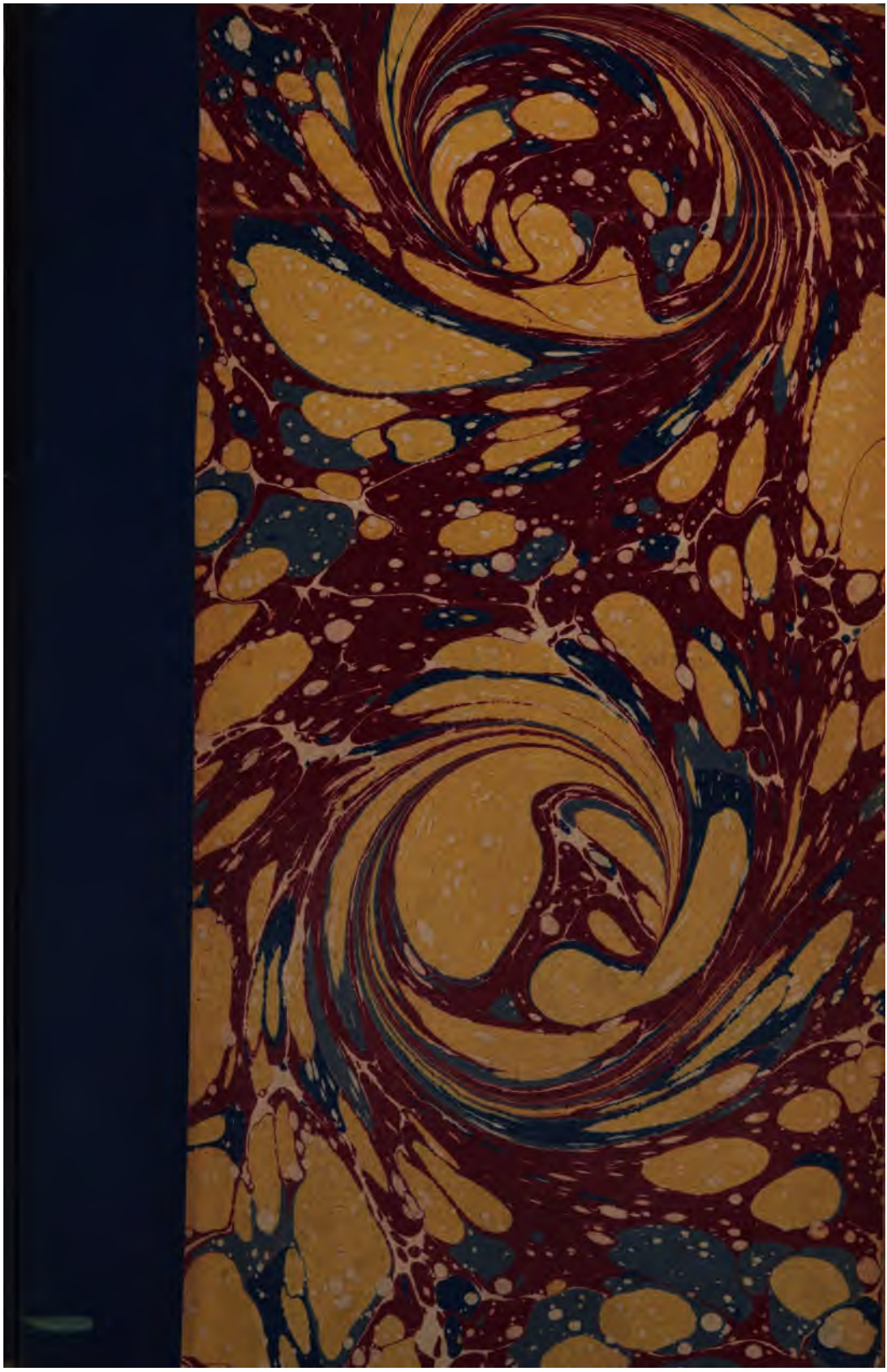

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# IL GRAN RIFIUTO,

## WHAT IT WAS, WHO MADE IT, AND HOW FATAL

## TO

# DANTE ALLIGHIERI.

A DISSERTATION ON VERSES FIFTY-EIGHT TO SIXTY-THREE OF THE THIRD CANTO OF THE INFERNO.

BY

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ETC. ETC. ETC.

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# IL GRAN RIFIUTO.

Poscia ch' io v' ebbi alcun riconosciuto,
Guardai, e vidi l' ombra di colui
Che fece, per viltate, il gran rifiuto.
Incontanente intesi, e certo fui,
Che quest' era la setta dei cattivi,
A Dio spiacenti ed a' nemici sui.

INFERNO, *canto* iii, *verses* 58 *to* 63.

IN that dread roar of cries, and sighs, and shrieks, and groans, and curses which the vault of Hell re-echoed as Dante approached the margin of its dark abyss, was heard a sound of wail so overwhelming, that the Poet paused to ask his conductor who they were whom grief thus overcame. He is told they are the shades of those who had done neither good nor evil, who had lived without blame and without praise, and that they are mingled with the quire of wicked angels, who, in the celestial rebellion, neither fought for God, nor against Him, "ma per se foro". Then, looking around him, Dante sees a long troop of souls preceded by a flag rushing through the starless air with great rapidity, and having recognised several of these whom he had personally known, his attention is drawn to one in particular, whom he no sooner

perceives than, immediately, he is aware who and what they are—

la setta de' cattivi
A Dio spiacenti ed a' nemici sui.

There is here a progression in turpitude. First come those contemptible beings who leave no name either for good or for ill, and are envious of all who do. Next we have the depraved cowardly angels, and, in the same category of baseness with them, are these "cattivi" hateful alike to God and to his enemies, the distinct representative of whom is that nameless individual—

Che fece, per viltate, il gran rifiuto.

Dante never divulged who this person was; he is the type of a sect for which the Poet expresses the utmost contempt, and who are equally displeasing to God and to his enemies. Not even his own son Pietro knew who this shade was meant for, he only believed that it was intended for Celestin V., who, from a praying recluse, having been raised, much against his will, in 1294, to the dignity of Pope, was craftily induced by the Cardinal Gaetano, for the good of the Church and of his own soul, to renounce it, which he speedily did, and returned to his hermit mode of living. This pious soul, well known for his sanctity as Pietro da Morrone in the Abruzzi, was not only revered in his lifetime for holiness of character and power of working miracles, but in 1313, was made a Romish Saint.

Modern commentators are satisfied with holding Celestin to be the person intended, but it was not so with them of old. The writer of the Ottimo will not venture on his own authority to affirm that Celestin is meant, and refers to him only with "*vuole alcun dire*". Boccaccio remarks—"*Chi costui fosse non si sa assai certo.*" He mentions two opinions, one, that Pietro Morrone was meant, another, that Esau, who sold his birth-right, was intended, but prefers the former, seeking to excuse Dante for putting a saint in Hell, by remarking that he had not been canonized when Dante wrote. This excuse, however, will not now serve, for it has been shown that the Inferno, as we have it now, was not finished till after 1313. Benvenuto da Imola is very positive that Dante neither did nor could mean Celestin—"*Sed breviter, quidquid dicatur, mihi videtur quod auctor nullo modo loquatur nec loqui possit de Cœlestino. Primo quia licet Cœlestinus fecerit maximam renunciationem, non tamen ex vilitate fecit, immo ex magnanimitate.*" In this opinion the majority of commentators are agreed, and it was also that of Petrarca, than whom there could not be a better judge. In his "Trattato di vita solitaria", he praises Celestin for this act—"*che per nobiltà d'animo, e non per viltà, havesse abbandonato il mondo, e se fosse dato alla contemplatione di Dio*" (see the passage as noticed by Daniello).

In the "Nidobeatina" we read as an original note, not found in the "Vendeliniana"—"Non è da credere che Dante intendesse di questo, Fra Piero, lo quale è

canonizato per Santo. Ma intese di Diocletiano Imperatore, che rifiutò l'Imperio, secondo Eutropio" (lib. ix). Buti also protests against ascribing "*viltate*" to Celestin—"ma quanto alla verità non fu così, che per viltà rinunciasse, ma per vera umiltà" Landino suggests that the Poet may have left this an open question, not intending any one individual in particular. Venturi objected to Esau, chiefly because alluded to in Pard. viij, 130, as characteristic of reprobates, and since Dante could not have known him; but though, with Vellutello and Daniello, he thought that Celestin was meant, yet he considered his renunciation as the result of greatness of mind, not of viltà. Volpi in naming Celestin had also doubts on the subject, adding "*come alcuni vogliono*". Giovanni Villani, Machiavelli, and others who have written about Celestin, have regarded him with veneration, and spoken of him with respect. During his lifetime he was much sought after for his sanctity, and many desired to follow the rules of the order of Celestins which he established. When he had passed the full measure of human life, at the age of 79, or as others state 72, he was certainly unfitted by his years, no less than by his retired and meditative habits, for the government of the church to which he had been chosen.

After his abdication, as many christians held him to be the true Pope and his successor an usurper, Bonifazio put him in prison, where he soon died, not without suspicion of having been murdered, and when

the body, which, by the Pope's orders, had been buried deep to avoid discovery, was brought to light, a nail was found to have been driven through the skull (see Bosso 'Storia d'Italia', V. xv, l. v, c. 12).

As Bonifazio VIII became Dante's political enemy, the resignation of Celestin has been regarded as having had a remote influence on the ruin of the Poet and his party. But Celestin in renouncing an office for which he was unfitted and never ought to have been chosen, acted conscientiously, and showed that he preferred the good of the church, and of his own soul above all worldly considerations. What he did was done for the love of God, and therefore he cannot be intended as the type of those who are especially hateful to Him. The state of mind which the rules of his order inculcated, divine contemplation, was surely too intimately associated with Dante's own heaven, for him to personify their author as the chief of the *cattivi*. We must remember that Dante was himself a contemplative theologian. Well may Barcellini, in his "Industrie Filologiche", exclaim—"On what grounds could Dante, who merits the title of Theological Poet, imagine that, by his rinunciation, Celestin sinned like that wicked and slothful servant whom we read of in the Gospel."

In fact it is not probable that the individual here alluded to by Dante was a member of any religious order. The Poet no where shows a vindictive antipathy to the religious orders. It is believed, at one time, that he had the intention of joining them. But

these "cattivi" with their *capo squadro* are the special objects of his most withering scorn. What this shade was, so also were they, for all followed the same banner, which was not that of the Church.

Dante left on record, that he considered his election to the office of Prior of the Republic, which he held from June 15th to August 15th, 1300, to have been the occasion and beginning of all his troubles. This was nearly six years after Bonifazio became Pope. He does not charge the pontiff with having originated them, much less his emissary Carlo di Valois, but rather his fellow citizens,

Li cittadin della città partita.

It is to the *discordia* prevailing among these, and more especially to the conduct of *la parte selvaggia*, the *Bianchi*, or moderate Guelfs, with whom Dante was associated, in opposition to the *Neri*, who were the more violent and dangerous, and the consequent excesses of the latter

Con la forza di tal che testè piaggia,

that Dante ascribes the proscription of himself and his party.

Where Dante does bestow a passing notice on Celestin, it is free from bitterness of spirit (Inf. xxviii, 105-8). Bonifazio speaking of him is made to say, that his predecessor had little love for the keys, and did not care to keep them—a simple fact well contrasted with his own greediness, who loved these

keys so well, that he sought them with fraud and retained them by violence.

The political sense of the Divina Commedia has opened up to us at the commencement of the poem a space of time extending over several years. There is here an allegorical sketch of the most important period of the Poet's political career, and we might well expect that those persons whose conduct had been fatal to his prospects and his political hopes would, in some way, figure on the scene. This seems necessary to give to the *tableau* that completeness which the subject required. In the regions of Hell, the Poet has recourse to prophetic prevision, a faculty of the damned which affords him an unfailing means of overtaking offenders living at the period of the vision; but in the ante-infernal region, and before Acheron is passed, this mode is not available. Living characters here occur to mind, who are too intimately associated with the political allegory to be omitted, and they are alluded to as nameless shades. This hypothesis is borne out by analogy, and confirmed by history.

The "cattivo coro degli angeli", as is here related, lost their state and place in heaven through their pusilanimous neutrality. The "cattivi" fell from a similar cause. The former were those who would not, when required, support the authority of the divine government; the latter, by analogy, are those who would not, at a critical moment, support the government of the Florentine Republic. We must not lose sight of the historical character which Dante has given to his

introduction, the things there alluded to have reference to passing events.

Dino Compagni and Giovanni Villani, the contemporaries of Dante, who also took part in these events, state in their Chronicles, that, to the pusilanimous neutrality of the party Bianchi, with which Dante was connected, all the misfortunes which overwhelmed him and them were owing.

The recognized head of this party was Messer Vieri de' Cerchi, who, with his wealth, family, and supporters, was the most potent person in the Republic, virtually ruled the authorities, and having the people also on his side, possessed all the necessary means of controling the course of events, had his courage and capacity been equal to the occasion. But they were not: in these qualities himself and his family signally failed, and the historians charge both them and him with the identical guilt "*viltate*", which involved the Bianchi and their recreant chief in all the horrors of a present Hell, and the prospects of a future one.

The head of the Neri was Messer Corso Donati, a nobleman of reckless and unprincipled character, and much in favour with the Pope. He was the personal enemy of the Cerchi, and treated Messer Vieri with insulting arrogance. The contest between the two parties threatened to involve Florence in the greatest disasters. Dante sought to prevent them by banishing the chiefs of each. The Pope had previously sent for Messer Vieri to Rome, exhorting him to become friends with his opponent; on this occasion, says

Villani, he showed so little judgement, and so much obstinacy and strangeness of manner, affirming he was at enmity with no one, that the Pope took much offence both against him and his party (Vill. l. viii, 38). When other efforts at pacification had failed, and the Bianchi were exposed to the vengeance of their enemies, aided by Carlo di Valois and his French cavalry, the Cerchi were exhorted by the Signori to defend themselves and their party, but they would not, Messer Vieri de' Cerchi not only refused, but set so bad an example, shewing an utter want of confidence in himself and his friends, that the people were discouraged, the rulers remained helpless, and the city was subjected to all the horrors of a town taken by assault. A bold and patriotic policy would have prevented these evils. Florence had sufficient means to set Carlo di Valois with his troop of twelve hundred cavalry at defiance, and to put down Messer Corso, and only needed an energetic leader to direct her arms. Dante, who had gone to the Pope as ambassador, was detained by him in Rome, for Bonifazio well knew that the Poet's presence in Florence would have defeated his treacherous schemes. The Cerchi showed themselves arrant cowards—"ma i savi uomini diceano: E' son mercatanti, e naturalmente sono vili, e i loro nemici sono maestri di guerra e crudeli uomini"—"e volendo i Cerchi signoreggiare, furono signoreggiati" (Dino Compagni l. i, 27). Dino expressly states that the power and influence of the Cerchi were so great in Florence, that they might

easily have obtained the Signoria, which they were counselled to do, but they refused "più per viltà che per pietà" (Dino l. i, 19). And this is confirmed by Villani who states—"per lo seguito grande che aveano i Cerchi, il reggimento della città era quasi in loro podere" (l. viij, 38).—Politically they were—"di grande affare, possenti e di grandi parentadi, e ricchissimi."—Personally they were—"morbidi, salvatiche, e 'ngrati, siccome gente venuti in piccol tempo in grande stato e podere" (Vill. l. viii, 38). Dante himself did not love them, and it was from principle rather than personal affection that he joined their party, which was that of the people, by whose aid he hoped to preserve the peace of the Republic. He had once attempted to form a third party which should embrace both moderate guelfs and ghibelins, but not succeeding he joined the Bianchi—"accorgendosi che per sè medesimo non poteva una terza parte tenere, la quale giusta, la ingiustizia delle altre abbattesse, con quella si accostò, nella quale, secondo il suo giudizio, era meno di malvagità" (Boccaccio).

On the 15th October 1301, new priori came into office at Florence, of whom Dino Compagni was one. The Neri pretended to aid them with their advice, and, though suspected, were listened to—"we gave them good words," says Dino, "when we ought to have been sharpening our swords" (l. ii, 31). Attempts at reconciliation were regarded as covert acts of treachery. "La gente che tenea co' Cerchi, ne prese viltà, dicendo: Non è da darsi fatica, chè pace

sarà. E i loro avversari pensavano pur di compiere le loro malizie" (ibid.).

When Carlo di Valois and his followers had entered Florence, the Signori elected forty citizens of both parties to consult for the safety of the state. Those who intended evil remained silent—"*gli altri aveano perduto il vigore*" (Dino). "Baldino Falconieri, uomo vile, dicea: Signori, io sto bene, perch' io non dormia sicuro: mostrando viltà a' suoi avversari." Messer Lapo Salterelli, a bianco odious to Dante (Pard. xv, 128), sought to obtain favour of the Neri by blaming the Signori. In another place Dino exclaims of him—"O Messer Lapo Salterelli, minacciatore e battitori de' rettori, che non ti serviano nelle tue questioni, ove t'armasti? in casa i Pulci, stando nascoso." Messer Manetto Scali, however, did arm his people and fortify his palace, but was cajoled into inactivity by the Spini (see Dino l. ii, 34. 35. 45). Even after Carlo di Valois had thrown off the mask of pretended good will, and Corso Donati with his reckless rabble had burst into the city, the pusilanimous Cerchi would do nothing to oppose him. Messer Sciatta de' Cancellieri, captain of the Florentines, offered, with three hundred horse, to go and seize Corso, but Vieri de' Cerchi replied, "let him come" trusting to the people for protection, but the people were without a leader and dispirited (Villani l. viii, 48). "I Neri, conoscendo i nemici loro vili e che aveano perduto il vigore, s'avacciarono di prendere la terra" (Dino l. ii, 38). The horrors began: pilage, arson, and murder. The Priori

ordered the great bell over their palace to be sounded, but it was of no avail—"perchè la gente sbigottita non trasse di casa i Cerchi. Non uscì uomo a cavallo nè armato."—"I Cerchi si rifuggirono nelle loro case, stando colle porte chiuse" (l. ii, 41. 42). The Cerchi were paralysed by fear and avarice—"tra per la paura e per l'avarizia, i Cerchi di niente si providono, e erano i principali della discordia. E per non dar mangiare a' fanti, e per loro viltà, niuna difesa nè riparo feciono nella loro cacciata" (l. ii, 45).

Dino Compagni, who shared the Poet's policy, shared his feelings also, and long and bitter are his execrations on those faint hearted citizens, who like the "cattivo coro degli angeli", in this hour of fiery trial, would do nothing for the defence of the Republic and themselves. "O malvaggi cittadini, procuratori della distruzione della vostra città, dove l'avete condotta!" Messer Berto Frescobaldi was indebted to the Cerchi for the loan of a large sum of money. Dino exclaims—"Ove li meritasti? ove comparisti?" And of Manetto Scali, a relative of the Cerchi, who was induced to do nothing, he says—"ove prendesti l'arme? ove è il seguito tuo? ove sono i cavalli coperti? Lasciastiti sottomettere a coloro, che di niente erano appresso a te." And to the people he says—"And you O popolani who desired to obtain the offices of the government, and to reap the honours, and to occupy the palaces of the rulers, where was your defence, blaming your friends and praising your ene-

mies, and that merely to save yourselves"—"solamente per campare!" (l. ii, 45. 46).

Can we doubt, after these details, who the *cattivi* were, "*che mai non fur vivi*"—and who he was, their type and chief—

*Che fece, per viltate, il gran rifiuto.*

M. Fauriel in his "Vie de Dante", has, in few words, stated the substance of this unpardonable conduct (vol. i, p. 176). "Le peuple florentin avait couru aux armes au premier éclat de ces hostilités; mais personne ne se présenta pour le commander. Les chefs du parti des Blancs, les Cerchi, avaient rejeté toutes les propositions courageuses qui leur avaient été faites, et ne songeant qu'à eux (per se foro) s'étaient contentés de se fortifier dans leurs palais. Les prieurs étaient des hommes incapables de prendre un parti vigoureux, et autour desquels chacun hésitait à se ranger." Had the Cerchi acted like brave and resolute men, Florence would have escaped the miseries that followed—the government would not have passed to the creatures of the Neri—Messer Cante Gabrielli would not have been made podestà—six hundred citizens would not have been sent into exile—and Dante would have been spared the misfortunes that befell him. But Messer Vieri refused to do his duty, and therefore all these things followed. Well might this be called 'the great refusal', for such indeed it was by its fatal effects.

An attentive consideration of the entire passage, Inf. iii, 52-63, suggests these reflections. Several of the souls which followed the restless banner were well known to Dante, a circumstance in favour of their being Florentines, once his fellow citizens. They all gathered to it, as one troop. This insegna has a meaning, and was not that of the Church, nor, as Buti suggests, "della carnalità".

Dante says—

> ....correva tanto ratto
> Che d'ogni posa mi pareva indegna.

If any of those who followed this banner were Florentines, it is probable that they all were, for it was one troop, distinguished by its proper ensign. The banner therefore was probably the ensign of the Florentine Republic. Its restlessness would go far to transform this probability into a certainly, for such was the character of the government—

> Quante volte del tempo che rimembre
> Legge, moneta, e uficio, e costume
> Hai tu mutato, e rinnovato membre!
> E se ben ti ricorda, e vidi lume,
> Vedrai te simigliante a quella inferma,
> Che non puo trovar posa in su le piume,
> Ma con dar volta suo dolore scherma. (*Purg.* vi, 145-151.)

This might all be summed up in the movement of the flag—

> Che d'ogni posa mi pareva indegna.

The troop of souls which followed the banner was so long, that the Poet says he could not have thought

death had slain so many. This cannot be meant in reference to all mankind from the beginning of the world, which would be absurd, but to a certain class of persons only, to those whose banner this was; Dante could not have believed that so many of these were dead. After he had recognized several of them, he perceives the shade of him who for want of courage and of confidence in his own powers and resources, made a most disasterous refusal, for such his words imply.

This individual he does not name, any more than the others whom he knew, probably because, like the "cattivo coro degli angeli", they had not died, and therefore the Poet might well be surprised to see so many of them here, as if they had. When he perceives the shade of this person he knows at once who they all are, "*la setta de' cattivi*" displeasing alike to God and to his enemies, and whom Dante, in his soul, abhorred.

The word *viltate* is used by the Poet in the sense of cowardice, and is applied by him to those of whom better things had been expected; it is the opposite to "*ardire e franchezza*". Thus Virgil reproves the faint heartedness of Dante, when, doubting of his own powers to sustain the perils of the proposed voyage through Hell, he seems disposed to decline the undertaking. Virgil, perceiving his motive, says—

L'anima tua è da *viltate* offesa.

And when he had related the celestial assistance on which Dante might reckon, he exclaims—

Perchè tanta *viltà* nel cuore allette?
Perchè ardire e franchezza non hai?

But a still more remarkable passage in which *viltate* is used in the sense of shameful timidity, or cowardice, is that where the Poet alludes to the pusilanimous conduct of Frederic, King of Sicily, who had joined the Ghibelin League, but on the death of the Emperor Henry VII, refused to continue his support, declined to become its chief, and would not accept the signoria of Pisa—

Vedrassi l'avarizia e la *viltate*
Di quel che guarda l'Isola del fuoco,
Dove Anchise finì la lunga etate. (*Purg.* xix, 130–3.)

This, in fact, is so applicable to the shade of him,

Che fece, per viltate, il gran rifiuto,

that some expositors have supposed the King of Sicily to be here intended, but Frederic did not die till years after Dante, in 1337, nor is it probable that the Poet here alludes to him.

The Abbate Barcellini proposed the brother of Giano della Bella, to whom, on the latter having been driven from Florence, the people had recourse as his successor, but who refused to be their leader. The Padre Lombardi, who doubted if Dante had ever seen Celestin, following up this view, named M. Torrigiano de' Cerchi. Recently, the Editor of the Commentary by Buti has suggested Augustulus, "colla deposizione del quale morì fra noi la maestà del romano imperio", but this, I think, is wandering far away

from the intention of the Poet, we might as well go back to the older hypothesis of Diocletian.

The sense of the word "*cattivi*", here used by Dante, is *vili*, with an especial reference to disloyalty, as is shown by the context. The "cattivo coro degli angeli", who were neither loyal nor rebellious, were *disleali e vili*, and sought only to save themselves, "per se foro". So "*la setta de' cattivi*" were uomini disleali e vili, and hence are mingled with them. They were cowards, without energy of character, and lost to every sense of public duty. Now this, as we have seen, was precisely the character of the Florentine Bianchi, especially of those who followed the Cerchi, Dino Compagni ascribes viltà to them all. They acted not the part of men, they had lost all manly vigour; Dante declares they never had any—"*che mai non fur vivi.*" Dante and Dino are here agreed, "*la setta de' cattivi*", of the former, correspond to the "malvagi cittadini" of the latter, the most conspicuous among whom was the faint hearted and disloyal Messer Vieri de' Cerchi. He and they were equally displeasing to the opposite parties, God and his enemies. Like the "cattivo coro", they would fight for neither one nor the other, "ma per se foro". In a political sense they were alike hateful to the Ghibelins and the Guelfs, to the Emperor and the Pope. Dante, who held the pusillanimous in abomination, had a supreme contempt for them all; this we can well understand from his own frank and fervent character.

E quel che più ti gravera le spalle,
Sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia,
Con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle. (*Pard.* xvii, 61–3.)

When Dante completed his Inferno, it is more than probable that Messer Vieri de' Cerchi had departed to the region of shades. He was a man passed the middle age at the battle of Campaldino in 1289, where he commanded a body of Florentine Cavalry. Villani relates, that, although suffering in one of his legs, possibly from gout, being required to name those of his own *sesto* who should first attack the enemy, he named only himself, his son and his nephews, or grandsons *(nepoti)* (lib. vii, c. 130). Now, if he had grandsons old enough to take the field in 1289, he must then have been upwards of sixty, and it is not probable, therefore, that his life extended much beyond the year 1302, when he would have been nearly four score. But admitting that the Chronicler meant the nephews of Messer Vieri, who was the head of the family (though his naming them for the action of greatest danger, along with himself and son, would imply that he considered them as his own) even on this showing, he may well be supposed to have been nearly fifty, and thirteen years afterwards to have entered at least his sixtieth year, so that as it has been shown that the Inferno was not finished till after the death of Pope Clement V, in 1313, it is much more probable than not, that Messer Vieri de' Cerchi was then also among the departed. But to return to the "cattivi".

On the confines of Hell, these outcasts are carried along with an irresistable whirling motion, headed by a banner that disdains any rest.

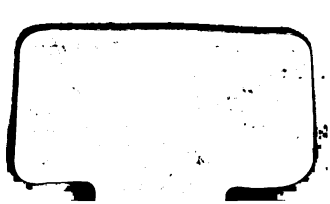
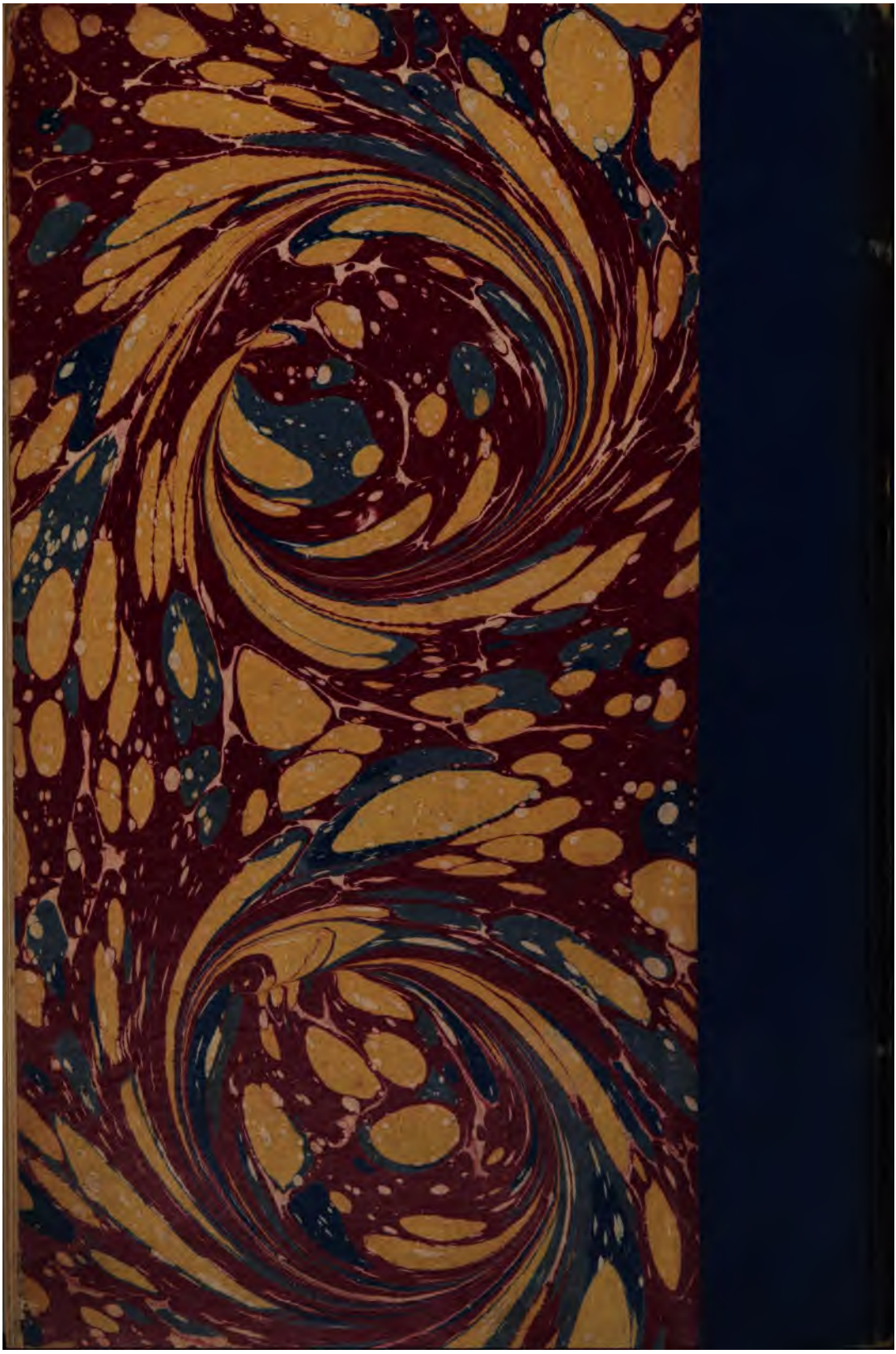
Dante often assigns punishments with a sort of poetic justice drawn from the special offences committed. Those who with shameful quiescence and cowardly torpidity, in the hour of extreme peril, instead of coming forth like living, energetic men, to the support of the government and the defence of their city, skulked and hid and kept out of the way, who shut themselves up in their houses, and even pretended to be friends with their enemies, these fear-stricken Florentines, dead to reason, which is always on the side of duty, and therefore destitute of their proper life, for, as saith the Master, "vivere è ragione usare", these "cattivi", scared by false inferences, and neglecting alike their obligations and their interests, who would not rally to the rescue of the Republic, and gather round the banner of the Gonfaloniere, are here for ever rushing after it as if nothing could stop them. And that conspicuous, well known figure—

Che fece, per viltate, il gran rifiuto,

is their nameless chief, whose refusal to defend the party Bianchi was the ruin of the Poet. Well might Dante recognize him again, and thus know who and what the souls in that long troop of loathsome sluggards were, by Heaven rejected and by Hell refused.

Thus, in a few significant verses, Dante has given

an epitome of that political revolution which it is necessary to bear in mind, in order to understand the full meaning of his exordium. And he has done so in the way most congenial to his own lofty spirit, pointing distinctly to the individual who, more than any other, deserved the character which he has so forcibly drawn, but whom he would not name, righty judging his name unworthy of record in Italy's imperishable Book.

ONORATE L'ALTISSIMO POETA.

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